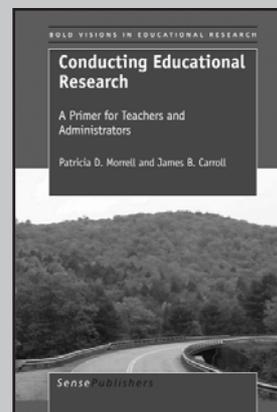


Review

Conducting Educational Research: A primer for teachers and administrators

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In their ways, teaching and learning to research and to design have their similarities. There is no single approach nor are there 'right ways' to research or design so there is the challenge, for teacher and learner alike, of striking a balance between, on the one hand, too little structure and guidance and, on the other, too much.

This text sets out very much within conformist explorations of research and so could be described as being another basic primer. The authors manage to present the arch binary of research practice – that of qualitative and/or/versus quantitative approaches – at a time when such a polarisation is not necessarily helpful either pedagogically or in educational research, where it is often a blend of methods that is drawn upon.

To take this observation further, pedagogically this text suffers a weakness in its very structured approach. For example, by page three the Five Chapter Format (of a dissertation or report) structure is announced and it remains the organisational framework for the whole. This may well be a matter of the authors' belief that offering students a high degree of scaffolding is the best way forward but we would contend that there is more lost than gained in such an approach. As they say, 'The text leads preservice and inservice teachers and administrators step-by-step through *the* (sic) process of educational research...' (p.xvi, our emphasis).

If a text such as this is to serve as a (US) masters-level 'primer' then students/teachers embarking on research projects will undoubtedly need to track, or refer back to, the multiplicity of technical terms they are learning to use. Thus, a first check of such a text is of what guiding structures there are to help navigate the whole. Here the glaring omission is a comprehensive index. Although the *Table of Contents* pages are comprehensive and organised

in an unambiguous way they run to a total of eight and a half pages so, if one were back-tracking a particular topic, it is necessary to work through this list to find what is needed.

Meanwhile, there is the useful inclusion of the *Glossary* whose contents, rather frustratingly, are not page-referenced to locate expanded contextual material available in the body of the text. Thus, to follow the overall framing binary, we find the entry for '*Qualitative – School of research that is descriptive in nature*' offering insufficient detail as a glossary item. Similarly, '*Quantitative – School of research that deals with quantities and statistics; generally measures characteristics of groups*' (p.273) is not only terse but is misleading by its inclusion of 'groups' as a focus of this method of research. Certainly, some of the definitions offer succinct information that would be suitable for an early researcher who is reading such a text for the first time and needs to accommodate new terms. However, reducing often quite complex terms, such as '*pilot study*' to '*a trial run of a study on a small scale*' without reference to the purposes of running a pilot study (which is expanded somewhat in the main text) could rather inhibit the criticality required to conduct meaningful research.

While the book does have a potentially useful common structure to its chapters, this, linked with a couple of other technical concerns, has some limitations. Each chapter opens with a concept map (not of the best quality) of what follows and a brief *chapter overview*. *Key terms* are presented in bold and are thus signalled to be found '...in the glossary at the end of the text' which in general is the case but not always so. *Figures and tables* are included '...for clarification and elucidation of key concepts' and these too are of varying efficacy (for example too many are not actual figures but are more text in note form that is

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almost indistinguishable from the main body of the writing. This may be a matter for the publisher's attention.)

The chapters also each have brief closing sections of *Next steps*, *Chapter self-check* and *Chapter review questions*. Including review material at the end of a chapter can be a useful strategy in prompting reflection and deeper thinking about the material presented and its applicability in the field. While the *Next steps* and *Chapter self-check* sections would generally stimulate useful reflection, the *Chapter review questions* offer little more than closed questions that prompt recall of facts or processes, thus contributing to a potentially limiting (over-scaffolding) of understanding for the learner.

A prerequisite of good research is that the prior art/literature is as extensively addressed as possible yet, in the case of this text, there is disappointingly thin use of the incredibly rich range of sources available to the beginning researcher. Few references are given at the close of each chapter and there is no substantive or aggregated reference list at the end of the text. Perhaps the authors trust the novice researcher's own research capabilities as would seem the case with the *Literature Review* chapter's six references five of which are URLs to such generic sites as Google Scholar, ERIC and AERA. While two examples that richly illustrate 'effective' writing and referencing are included as appendices to this chapter, the authors seem unable to provide similar evidence of academic rigour in the construction of their own text. Another chapter (Five) on *Collecting Data* offers just four references, two of which give theoretical evidence on the most effective colour to use for paper questionnaires.

Significantly, we feel, many key texts and authors are not cited when we feel that they could legitimately have been. Whether this is lack of professional etiquette, a plain oversight, that this text itself is rather another reinvention of the wheel, or a combination of these, we cannot judge. Examples might include seminal research methodologists such as for data coding and analysis: Miles and Huberman (1994); for interviews: Bloom (1954) and Gardiner and Parkin (1990); and, for group dynamics: Watts and Ebbutt (1987). There is also little to suggest the authors have differentiated the style or approach of the researcher within distinct paradigms such as phenomenology (Schutz 1967, 1970), interpretivist theory (Dilthey 1911, 1977), ethnography (Snow 1989), or other naturalistic approaches (Rutherford and Wilson, 1992). Babbie's classic *The Practice of Social Science Research* is cited twice as the 1992 (6th Edition) format while the 12th edition came out in 2009 (Babbie, 2009).

With regard to Chapter Six, *Analyzing Data*, the absence of reference to the work of Miles and Huberman (1994) is most notable. The lack of clear examples of how to code and categorise data seriously weakens the chapter's capacity to contribute to sound understanding of valid processes. The simplicity and ambiguity of the sample of coding offered in Figure 6.3 is not at all well articulated in the accompanying text. Meanwhile Chapter Seven on *Descriptive Statistics* offers no references for further reading – perhaps indicating an area that the authors feel most at home with. Even if this were the case, there will inevitably be readers who might want to explore issues further.

There are always minor issues with the transferability of texts such as this to other audiences than the home one. So it is unsurprising to find several of the usual localised terms that may need some re-interpretation to international settings ('report' which could be dissertation or thesis; 'administrator' which could be manager or leader). Similarly, the valorising of the American Psychological Association's referencing system and particular publication guides in the last chapter's *Where to from here?* advice may not be acceptable to some. Particular data analysis software packages are cited rather uncritically in light of what other options might be available. The authors do include a related website of supporting materials but the overall project has more than a few technical flaws which need ironing out.

This text is published as one of a series named *Bold Visions in Education* co-founded by two significant scholars: Joe Kincheloe and Kenneth Tobin. The editorial board comprises an equally worthy intellectual membership. The purposes of the series, the book's opening states, are '...of publishing cutting edge research that incorporated incisive insights supported by rich theoretical frameworks.' We cannot find enough evidence to support this claim for this text. The book has many merits as the 'primer' for beginning researchers it sets out to be and, were the beginner not to encounter any other text on research activity, they might well benefit from this one because of its structure, its effort to simplify, and its cautionary notes. It is a text that, along with others, could contribute to a library offering a *range* of perspectives from which the beginning researcher might triangulate their own professional approach. It offers a structured performance but it is no ground-breaker nor will it, in its present form, become a classic.

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